

24 June 2020

About the All-Party Parliamentary University Group (APPUG)

The group was founded in 1994 by MPs and Peers and aims to be the main avenue of communication between parliamentarians and vice-chancellors of the UK's universities.

The group examines the key issues facing the higher education sector by holding regular speaker meetings, dinners and breakfast briefings in Westminster. Guest speakers, who are leaders in their chosen profession, are invited from all areas of academia, politics, policymaking and industry. Membership of the group, and attendance at meetings, is open university leaders and parliamentarians only.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 the group has held two informal virtual meetings, in line with guidance from the All-Party Register.

Secretariat services for the APPUG are provided by Universities UK

Introduction: APPUG meeting on the current and future challenges universities face as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic

On Monday 20 April, the APPUG held a virtual meeting on the current and future challenges universities face as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This virtual meeting provided an opportunity for parliamentary members of the group to hear directly from vice-chancellors about the challenges posed to universities by Covid-19, and the way in which they were supporting students and the wider national effort to tackle the virus.

Vice-Chancellors presenting at this meeting were selected by virtue of them being members of the APPUG's council, the decision-making arm of the group which represents the diversity of institutional members.

The content of this submission is based on the issues and themes that emerged from the discussion at this meeting on 20 April. There have been developments within some of the issues since this discussion, but the key priorities and areas of concern remain largely the same.

Financial sustainability of the sector

1. Members discussed the impact Covid-19 would have on the financial sustainability of the sector. A member estimated that £6.9 billion would be lost if there is a 100% reduction in international student enrolments for 2020/21. In Scotland, it was estimated that 60% of losses would come from international student fees. It was also noted that there was an expected £790 million loss from refunding student accommodation, as well as lost catering and conference income. It was understood by the vice-chancellor members that the government could not fully replace lost income and therefore universities would need to be reducing costs, increasing efficiency, and moderating certain behaviours to support the sustainability of the sector.

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2. It was noted that a government package to support the sector must be seen in the longer-term context of government policy. The group discussed a number of key areas in relation to this, such as:
 - The importance of maintaining research output to reboot the economy
 - Universities as large employers of highly skilled employees and the risk to jobs if there is a downturn
 - Universities' role in providing public service key workers
 - Students entering university in 2020
 - The importance of maximising value to taxpayers
 - Mitigating the loss of income and cashflow to avoid financial failure or the need to significantly reduce provision for students and research activity.
3. Members also discussed the important role universities play as anchor institutions within their communities, highlighted by efforts to house NHS workers and the homeless during the pandemic and their work producing PPE and loaning equipment. Members highlighted other areas that demonstrated the value of the sector including driving social mobility, international influence, institutions' local social and cultural impact and their role in driving regeneration.
4. The central role universities could play in regenerating the economy and training the future workforce was discussed, alongside the likelihood that their ability to do so would be limited without additional government support. Vice-chancellor members acknowledged they could refocus to better meet skills needs.
5. A vice-chancellor member noted that although their institution, unlike others, would likely be able to survive the predicted reduction in income, they would not be able to undertake the activities that would make a much-needed contribution to rebuilding the economy.
6. It was noted that the devolved administrations operated under different financing models. An audit in Scotland found that only three universities were in a surplus, the rest were in a more precarious financial position. Members discussed the need to consider how to maintain the financial sustainability of the sector moving forward. It was noted that aside from the loss of funding from international students, the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) was the greatest financial challenge to the sector.

International Students

7. Members of the group highlighted the potential impact of a drop in international students as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. A vice-chancellor estimated that across the sector £6.9billion would be lost if there was a 100% reduction in international student enrolments for 2020/21. The group noted the quality of British higher education, with 95 universities in the top 500 universities in the world, and considered what steps the government should take to make the UK a leading destination for international students. The group discussed ways this could be done including:

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- Simplification of the visa process, one member noted that applying for a Tier 4 visa was expensive and bureaucratic.
 - The introduction of the post-study work route could be brought forward in order to make the UK a more attractive study destination.
 - Work could be done through the FCO to encourage countries such as China and Malaysia to recognise online degrees.
 - The sector could look at moving pre-sessional English Language Testing to on-course English Language Testing.
8. It was noted that policy changes of this nature would cost the government significantly less at a time when there was a great need for financial assistance from many sectors.
9. A member suggested the government should look further at how to send a message that the 'UK is open'. The group highlighted that a broader debate should take place about the importance of international students to various sectors of the economy including transport, leisure, retail and hospitality.
10. Both vice-chancellor and parliamentary members highlighted the high numbers of international students at their (local) institutions and the need to make them feel safe and able to stay in the UK during the crisis. It was noted that many international students faced specific financial challenges, for example, in India online banking was not widespread making the sending and receiving of funds difficult whilst banks remained closed.
11. Finally, the group discussed the importance of the higher education sector as a whole to the UK, and how to convey the message internationally that the sector is being invested in.

Student Accommodation

12. Both parliamentary and vice-chancellor members of the group highlighted ongoing challenges related to student accommodation during the Covid-19 crisis. Vice-chancellor members explained the steps that had been taken at their institutions to support students still living in university accommodation during this time but noted some issues remained with private accommodation providers. It was suggested that collective pressure could be applied to those providers still expecting students to pay accommodation fees, even after they were forced to move out.
13. The immediate issue of students not able to collect their belongings was raised by both vice-chancellor and parliamentary members as students who had to leave accommodation quickly were in some cases no longer in their contracts but unable to collect belongings¹.

¹ Guidance from the Department for Education for students looking to collect belongings has since been published on 21 May- [University Students and Covid-19 FAQ](#)

Widening participation

14. The impact of the crisis on the widening participation (WP) agenda was a concern for a number of members. A member noted that it was well established that BAME and WP students were harmed by predicted grades. Another member highlighted that often female students were advantaged by coursework and predicted grades, whereas, alongside BAME and WP students, white, middle-class males were negatively affected. These students would have less opportunity than they would otherwise. Discussion was had on whether weaker schools were less able to provide online activity to students.
15. There was discussion on the impact of the pause in outreach activity on WP students. A member highlighted that a whole cohort of students from a WP background would have not been receiving outreach activity, particularly in person, as they would normally. One vice-chancellor member highlighted their institution had run online open days and pre-sessions for WP students, which had proved popular.
16. Finally, there was discussion on how they could prepare students for the jump between A-level and university, noting the importance of transition activity for WP students.

The move to online education and digital poverty

17. Vice-chancellor members highlighted the successful move to online education in a matter of weeks. Members felt the move online was better than anticipated, however, it was to be expected that not all students or staff would be happy. There was discussion about the practical subjects that were particularly difficult to move online, such as arts courses, lab-based sciences and engineering programmes. It was noted that this could particularly impact small institutions.
18. Parliamentary members were keen to hear about the extent of digital poverty amongst students. One member asked whether more data could be provided to underpin assertions.
19. Vice-chancellor members outlined the activity that had been done to address digital poverty, such as equipment loans and student hardship funds. However, access to appropriate study spaces and WiFi were mentioned as an ongoing challenge.

Importance of research output

20. The role that research and innovation will play in rebooting the UK economy was discussed at length by the group. Members discussed the importance of not letting research degrade during lockdown. Vice-chancellor members noted that restarting research activity in 6 months would be very difficult; high quality research staff at all levels were essential, including at post-doctoral

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level. Members discussed the need to make decisions soon to stop the degrading of research.

21. Further discussion was had on the impact of a loss in high value research, ideas and skills that would be crucial for the economic recovery post Covid-19. Members agreed future investment in research would be a vehicle to national recovery.

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